First He was a Model, Now He's a Retired

By JOAN JOSEPH

GOOSE in the PARK

LIVING in close harmony with the ducks in Beacon Hill park is a Canada goose which joined the flock in 1956. Prior to this it had been residing in Terrace, B.C.

Frank Gavin, 1525 McRae Street, had rescued the gosling from the Skeena floods in 1948, cared for it, and although nothing was the matter with its flying ability, it never showed any marked inclination to return to its wild way of life.

Frank, who became very attached to the goose which had modeled for many of his carvings, brought it by aircraft with him when he left Terrace to reside on Vancouver Island.

Frank Gavin is now greens superintendent at Uplands golf course. He is Irish by birth but raised in England and came to Canada in 1929. He was a professional musician and through his work travelled extensively throughout Canada and the United States.

As a boy he was interested in wild life and sketching was one of his hobbies.

Oil paints and water colors, too, have claimed his attention from time to time, but as far back as he can remember his biggest urge has been his desire to carve. Hundreds of times he sat with a block of wood in one hand and a knife in the other, wondering where to start.

One raw Sunday in January, 1946, he was glancing through a book belonging to his son, when his attention was caught by a double-page illustration explaining how to carve a duck from wood. According to the drawings and instructions there was nothing complicated about the procedure. Follow the rules and a good imitation of an airborne mallard was bound to result. Frank wasn't so sure about that last implication, but with nothing to lose he dug up a piece of cedar and went to work.

The first mallard drake Frank turned out was a crude caricature of the real thing, but as far as its creator was concerned it was a start.

By comparison with Frank's present work it is difficult to believe that his exquisitely carved and artistically painted birds descended from that paint-daubed piece of whittled cedar.

SOON AFTER he started carving Frank decided that his guiding rule would be exactness. Every migratory, upland game, insectivorous and song bird he carves is as close to a perfect scale model of the original as he can make it. Experts who have examined his work haven't found it wanting.

In order to develop this exactness, Frank Gavin spent all his spare time for months gathering and studying the measurements of birds. During open seasons he hunted with an eye for variety rather than quantity. Before the birds reached the cooking stove, Frank had examined and counted virtually all their feathers and had wrapped a measuring tape around every inch of their bodies.

Frank experimented with a number of woods before he learned about alder from the Indians.

He found it ideal for his purpose, being strong, true-grained and taking an excellent finish.

At the beginning of his spare-time career Frank started his models with a jackknife. Now, knives being the most important item in his carving kit, he is very fussy about them.

When he chooses a jackknife it must have two blades of good steel and a handle that fits comfortably in his right hand. First thing he does it put the blade on an emery wheel and wear the shoulders off the back of the cutting edge. When the blade is almost as thin as a razor it is given a turn on the grindstone, then a hone on a razor strop. When he is carving steadily his knives have a life expectancy of about six months.

It takes a steady hand and a true eye along with a sharp knife to shape the smallest of Frank's birds, three-quarter inch by half-inch models used in his earring sets. On the large birds the finest work is on the wings. Each feather tip on the trailing edge of the wings is carved out. These are shaved down paper thin and actually feel like feathers.

PAINTING his models is the most exacting part of his work, Frank thinks, because to him it isn't just a matter of putting the right colors in the right places. He paints in practically every feather and is particularly careful to show the correct number of important feathers in the wings and tails. When he finishes, his models must display their feathers with the same naturalness as their wild counterparts. All the colors are produced with oil paints and when they are dry a protective coat of clear varnish is added. Frank mixes his own colors and is very particular about shades, too.

Frank Gavin—and a few of his incredibly life-like carvings.

Frank and his wife, Bertha, ran a gift shop in Terrace where his carving, under the name of Frankcraft, was sold. After 18 months, however, they had to give it up on account of Frank's health.

Although Frank Gavin won't admit having any favorites among the birds, the common Canada goose plays a dominant part in his work.

The gosling he rescued, which became part of the household, may have something to do with this, or perhaps it is because the bird's striking appearance catches the eye.

When the Gavins left Terrace to reside on Vancouver Island, they were so attached to the goose they had it flown here and took it to the pond where it is still. Frank goes to see it and when he calls, the goose comes hurrying along honking ecstatically.

Frank's carving as a hobby for his own amusement turned into a thriving part-time business. Friends coveted his work and the demand became so heavy that in an effort to slow things up he put prices on his birds.

This didn't work out as he had expected and orders came from souvenir shops in Prince Rupert and Vancouver and from individuals in nearly every province of the nation, from a dozen states in the union, from Alaska, England, France and Denmark.

One order from a noted Vancouver sportsman for 10 different game birds was one of the largest collections of Frank's work.

Another the Gavins found particularly hard to part with was for an American dentist's waiting room. Frank carved eight well-known songbirds, added a bluejay, woodpecker, mourning dove and seagull, all but the last two life-size. He cut two branches from his apple tree and placed six birds on one and five on the other, with the seagull as the centrepiece.

Like the children of the proverbial cobbler, the Gavins haven't many of the head man's products to show off. All the larger pieces he has done have been given away or have vanished in the wake of determined buyers. But on the buffet there is usually a delightful display of miniatures resting. There are Canada geese, mallards, pintails, with their mouths open and a tiny sliver of tongue showing; Mongolian pheasants, blue grouse and others.

Latest to join the miniature flock is the colorful pileated woodpecker and he, like many others, got in because someone made a special request.

Most of these birds are intended for the adornment of milady. There are the earring sets (including lapel pin), single lapel pins and scatter pins. Until recently none of the miniatures was intended to be worn by men, but under pressure of male admirers of his work, Frank broke odwn and set pairs of flying ducks on tie bars.

When Frank Gavin finally learned to carve it was only natural that he should try to produce in wood and paint the grace and beauty of British Columbia game birds.

For 15 of the 20 and more years he lived in Terrace he was secretary of the rod and gun club and from 1930 to 1933 he was field man for Ducks Unlimited.

Chances are that Frank would never have become the artist that he is if music hadn't played an important part in his life.

For whether Frank waves a baton or wields a knife there is grace and rhythm in his right hand.